

Around Town with the Town Manager #2

This week, May 17-21, has been one of worry and reflection. For the first two days, worry whether the voters would pass or reject the request to re-authorize the Capital Transportation Program. On Election Day, close to 8:00 p.m., we learned from Karen Richard, Town Clerk that the re-authorization request passed by 300+ votes. That was a tremendous relief since we were unsure how the Town could maintain its roads without this capital fund.

The debate over the issues of taxes and bike paths provided the community significant insight into how the Town Government is striving to hear its citizens. We are working towards informing and framing responses in a manner that allows clarity to our operations and objectives. Our main objective is to prudently provide for the present and future welfare of Colchester. Whether people are pleased or displeased with the voters' decision, readers should know of the Select Board's and my appreciation for taking the time to express one's vote.

As mentioned in last week's column, the first topic I wish to discuss is the "Evergreen Project". This project came about at a time (the summer of 2009) when the Town and Select Board were discussing ways to respond to citizen concerns about the growth of this Municipal Government. During these deliberations, the previous Director of Planning and Zoning resigned her position. This gave the Select Board the opportunity to examine the option of "downsizing government" with the help of a consultant, Evergreen Solutions, LLC. The goals of this assessment were:

- Assess the staffing and structure of the Town Hall departments (except public safety departments)
- Identify areas for improved efficiency and effectiveness
- Ensure sufficient job equity
- Make the department financially self-sustaining on its fees for service, while also implementing best practices policies, procedures and practices for all Town operations and reducing any unnecessary costs in these fiscal challenging times.

The study took about three and half months and yielded thirty recommendations that would increase revenues, reduce operating costs, and reduce the number of people employed by the Town. While recognizing the existing governmental structure was "lean" it could be leaner if the Town redefined some jobs, increased its use of technology, and began a process of cross training employees both within their respective departments and between departments with employees having similar skills. The Evergreen Report can be seen in its entirety at <http://www.colchestervt.gov/misc/EvergreenFinalReport.pdf>.

Implementing any plan is difficult because it causes change. Additionally, since recommendations are based on "a moment in time" new contingencies arise making implementation that much more difficult. Such is the case in the Planning and Zoning Department (P&Z).

Initial planning called for "downsizing" the P&Z by one person, redefining jobs and switching about tasks based on similar responsibilities, equal distribution of work, along with cross training of staff to handle different jobs within the department to ensure high level of

service to the community. In spite of their fears, all members of the Department stepped up to the plate and accepted the challenge to redefine both their roles within the Department and the Department's responsibilities to the Town, which include; Town Health Officer, Building Inspector, Waste Water Official, Town Planner, Zoning Administrator along with staffing both the Planning Commission and Development Review Board.

Once this reorganization was underway, the Department lost two additional staff members - both inspectors. The incumbent, Roland Brouillard, became the new Building Inspector who has recently left Town employment. The position of Life Safety Inspector whose responsibilities covered health, wastewater, building and fire regulations was also eliminated. Fortunately, (retired) Building Inspector, Gerry Kittle, has agreed to work part time as Wastewater Official in order to support us through the transition.

As can be seen from above, planned transitions do not always work out as envisioned. Nonetheless, the Town remains committed to "downsizing" and reducing the cost of government. At the same time, the Town is also committed to giving its dedicated employees the opportunities for advanced training to allow for career planning and growth. The dedication of Gerry Kittle and other professional engineers and wastewater designers, such as David Burke, who are volunteering time to assist with providing necessary training, have enhanced these changes.

In summary, implementing the Evergreen recommendations in conjunction with unforeseen early personnel changes will slow, but not hinder the transition of either the P&Z Department or the other municipal departments. Our goal is to make this municipal government leaner and more cost effective in its operations. Downsizing has its own "efficiency" costs of longer waiting times for permits and inspections along with higher fees to reduce the taxpayer borne costs to provide these services. To fully realize the benefits of these Evergreen initiatives, the Town will need the support, understanding, and patience of its citizens in order to achieve the community's desire to slow the growth of government and reduce its demand for taxes.